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COVER STORY

Contra aid public test for agency

'You won't see the Sandinista government seriously threatened'

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The USA's clandestine army is going back to war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime.

The CIA's secret agents slink into action wielding $100 million in new aid from Congress and a fearsome reputation for subversion throughout Latin America.

The target: Nicaragua's Marxist-oriented, revolutionary government — which overthrew dictator Anastasio Somoza, an ally of the USA, in 1979.

The means: Military training and weapons for an expanded and stronger guerrilla army, para-military operations, espionage, subversion — almost everything short of political assassination or sending USA troops.

The game plan: What CIA director William Casey calls a "proven method of overthrowing" governments — a combination of "nagging insurgent military pressure" and "withdrawal of domestic and international support."

The secret war is over for Eugene Hasenfus, a captured mercenary and ex-marine from Wisconsin who is standing trial in Managua for aiding the Nicaraguan rebel forces.

Reagan's signing of contra-aid legislation last weekend makes it legal for the intelligence agency to resume the most public and controversial "covert" operation in its history — advising and supplying Nicaraguan rebels.

The funds will begin flowing once Reagan signs a national security directive spelling out the details. One certain restriction: No USA agency or adviser can be caught within 20 miles of the Nicaraguan border.

The same precaution against a direct confrontation between the USA and Nicaragua applies to military war games in neighboring Honduras.

Some of the not-so-secret new operation is above-board: From $70 million in military funds will come training of contra field commanders, perhaps at U.S. bases. And $30 million is for medicine, clothes and other "humanitarian" aid.

The CIA's actual strategy, and the Sandinista response, are still being kept under the cloak. But there are some willing to speculate:

■ Ray Cline, a former CIA deputy director, sees "a race against time" between the contras and Sandinistas. The CIA should be able to afford "better airplanes" than the one Hasenfus parachuted from to deliver supplies to contra troops, he says.

And, Cline says, the military aid could draw "some very confrontational activity" from Nicaragua: "They're going to go bleating to the Russians and Cubans for help."

■ Robert White, U.S. ambassador to El Salvador in 1980-81, is convinced there is some truth to unofficial reports that Salvadoran army veterans are being recruited to fight for the contras.

White adds: "You can expect to see a lot more people killed, but you won't see the Sandinista government seriously threatened. That's not within the capacity of the contras."

■ David MacMichael, a former CIA analyst, says the Sandinistas, anticipating an eventual full-scale invasion by USA troops, have recently changed their defensive strategy.

"Their strategy had been to go immediately to the mountains and begin a prolonged war," he said. "Now it includes a determined defense of urban areas. They will defend house by house and barrio by barrio."

■ Robert Lee Woodward, Tulane University historian, says the Nicaraguans "have been trying to keep it low-key," but now he wouldn't be surprised to see Cuban combat troops deployed against the contras.

■ Hans-Joachim Maitre of Boston University, a contra backer, thinks the CIA will quickly train Nicaraguans as "deliverymen" on the supply flights, replacing USA mercenaries like Hasenfus.

And in exchange for the boost in military hardware, he says, the contras "will be forced to come up with a real strategy for fighting the war, not just getting by day to day as they have been."

■ Robert Leiken, a pro-contra analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says the cutoff in USA military aid two years ago "put the contras way behind the curve." Meanwhile, the Sandinista military has gotten bigger, stronger and more capable "in terms of communications, equipment, transport."

He foresees a Sandinista offensive, perhaps another incursion against rebel bases in Honduras.

■ Laurence Birns of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs believes the C-123 downed by the Sandinistas two weeks ago was taking supplies to a new "second front" the rebels and their backers are attempting to open "pell-mell" in southern Nicaragua.

While the CIA's role is now legal, critics of Reagan's Nicaragua policy have charged "the company," as its operatives call it, or the National Security Council, or both, jumped the gun. At issue is where between 12,000 and 20,000 rebel troops, mostly based on the Honduras border, have been getting military supplies.

Congress tried to sever the CIA's links with the contras in 1984, in the public glare of learning that the agency had directed the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Contra backers, such as retired Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, tried to sustain the rebel cause with private aid.

All imported weapons, they said, were bought with money in offshore banks to avoid violating laws against gun-running and fomenting foreign revolutions from USA soil.

But the private backers had the full support of Reagan, who kept pushing for more direct, official military help.

The U.S.-backed contras first received CIA funds — for 500 guerrillas — in 1981. Until Congress cut off the aid, upwards of $100 million was channeled through the CIA to the rebels.

Adding to the suspicions of critics were mysterious crashes of cargo planes flying out of El Salvador and Honduras, arrests of mercenaries in Costa Rica and reports that secret CIA funds were seeping into the contra effort.

All these led to a widespread belief that the CIA was in fact never far from the battlefront.

"The CIA has never been out of this thing," said Leiken. Last fall, the CIA was authorized to share intelligence with the contras and give them new communications gear.

The latest evidence of a CIA link came from Hasenfus, who claimed he and the rest of his crew were part of a network of veterans and ex-CIA types recruited by the agency to airlift weapons and supplies into Nicaragua — through El Salvador and Honduras — for the rebels.

Singlaub denied that he was behind the downed weapons-supply flight, but described the air-cargo network around Central America as a loose fraternity of job-hungry pilots competing for a mixed bag of jobs, some legal, some not.

A plane such as the one downed in Nicaragua, he said, "could be hauling cantaloupes to Texas one week and the next week hauling bullets to freedom fighters in Nicaragua."

William Leary, a CIA expert at the University of Georgia, says even now that the CIA is running the show, hired hands like Hasenfus and the

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rest of the crew of the downed C-123 "will be doing what they've been doing for a different employer."

Leary said that two years ago, while researching a book about Air America, an airline that flew CIA missions in Southeast Asia, he ran into William Cooper, the ex-CIA pilot who was killed flying with Hasenfus on the supply mission.

Leary says the network of former Marines, Green Berets and clandestine operatives includes "men in their 50s, who have a particular expertise. You just don't find on a street corner people who can do airdrops at night in strange locations."

Cooper, he said, "did hundreds of those in Southeast Asia. It's a pretty arcane skill."

Bernard McMahon, staff director of the Senate Intelligence Committee, charged with helping to oversee the covert program, says it will be legal for the CIA to employ USA citizens for action in Nicaragua, but doesn't think it will be "necessary."

The administration adamantly denied any official link with Cooper's plane, but there was an intriguing sidelight to the case.

Vice President George Bush, a former CIA director, said he had met and admired an ex-CIA agent, "Max Gomez," named by Hasenfus as the organizer of USA-directed contra supply flights out of El Salvador's main military airfield at Ilopango.

Gomez is a legendary, Cuban-born clandestine agent who wears a watch taken from Che Guevara when he was captured.

Former agents like Gomez, experts say, only need to be kept at enough distance to make a CIA denial plausible.

A good thing to remember when following the open "covert" war in Central America, ex-CIA man MacMichael advises, is: "If it's a properly done CIA operation, a CIA connection can't be shown."